Diseases and Conditions

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Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis

Complications

By Mayo Clinic Staff

As the disease progresses, people with ALS experience complications, which may include:

Breathing problems

Over time, ALS paralyzes the muscles needed to breathe. Some devices to assist your breathing are worn only at night and are similar to devices used by people with sleep apnea. For example, you may be given noninvasive positive pressure ventilation to assist with your breathing at night.

In the latter stages of ALS, some people choose to have a tracheostomy — a surgically created hole at the front of the neck leading to the windpipe (trachea) — to enable the full-time use of a respirator that inflates and deflates their lungs.

The most common cause of death for people with ALS is respiratory failure. On average, death occurs within three to five years after symptoms begin.

Speaking problems

Most people with ALS will develop trouble speaking over time. This usually starts as some mild slurring of words, often intermittently, but progresses over time to be more severe. With time, speech becomes more difficult for others to understand, and people with ALS often rely on other communication technologies

to communicate.

Eating problems

When the muscles that control swallowing are affected, people with ALS can develop malnutrition and dehydration. They are also at higher risk of getting food, liquids or saliva into the lungs, which can cause pneumonia. A feeding tube can reduce these risks.

Dementia

Some people with ALS experience problems with memory and making decisions, and some are eventually diagnosed with a form of dementia called frontotemporal dementia.

Risk factors

Preparing for your appointment

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References

Products and Services

1. Newsletter: Mayo Clinic Health Letter
2. Book: Mayo Clinic Family Health Book, 4th Edition

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